

# Addressing Leash Reactivity

When dogs with sociable natures are not able to interact with other dogs or people as freely as they wish, they can feel frustrated and sometimes display wild exuberance at the end of the leash when they see a person or another pooch. Similarly, dogs who are afraid of other dogs or people can display behaviors ranging from attempting to hide to pulling, barking, snarling, lunging and more.

It's important for both of these types of dogs to learn that passing dogs and people predict good things for them, as this can help them remain calm.

## Replace undesirable behaviors by teaching new ones

Help your dog by using humane, reward-based training strategies that are supported by the world's leading veterinary, behavior and training experts. Using punishment-based techniques can often make problems like aggression worse, and/or create new problem behaviors.

Directing the dog's attention to a training task and rewarding their participation is particularly useful because it creates calmer on-leash responses that can later take the place of undesirable ones and become the dog's default response.

Carry pea-sized, highly palatable treats in a treat pouch or pocket when out on walks to provide a valuable, convenient way to teach and build more desirable responses out on walks. Here are some useful behaviors to teach:

### 1. Automatic check-in

Initially, start with rewarding the dog for offering eye contact without any people/dogs present (in a relatively "boring" environment). The more you reward the eye contact, the more the dog will "check in" with you automatically. You can then gradually make the environment less boring and more distracting. Be careful not to progress too quickly, though! If your dog completely stops checking in with you, that's probably a sign you've made the environment too distracting too quickly.

### 2. Notice the dog/person

Gradually progress to your dog noticing another dog or person at a far-away distance and not reacting. Reward them each time so that their pattern becomes "I see another dog, then I look to

you for a treat.” This helps build an automatic reaction of seeing a dog and turning to face their person.

### 3. Turn

“Turn” is a great cue to use when you see a dog or person suddenly come around the corner. Simply say *turn*, place a treat right on the dog’s nose to guide him away, and feed when the dog turns with you. (If there’s a chance your dog might react with aggression, use caution putting your hands near his mouth.) Periodically practice turns on a walk even when there is nothing to avoid.

### 4. Find It

Guide the dog toward a positive alternative activity by tossing a small handful of treats for him to find.

*(See Additional Resources listed below for videos on how to teach Find It and other useful behaviors)*

## Quick fixes for when a person or dog suddenly appears

- Cross the street.
- Do a U-turn and move back in the opposite direction.
- Turn and move away in an alternative direction and route.
- Move off the main pathway until the human or dog distraction has passed by. Temporarily walk on a grassy patch, driveway, or parking lot bordering the sidewalk.
- Redirect: If your dog looks as if they are about to react, use an interrupter such as a treat, a cue for a known behavior, or something like a hand clap or a light tap/tickle on the back that doesn’t scare the dog but simply breaks their focus. Immediately cue a well-known behavior that you can reward, such as a hand touch or the turn cue.
- Use visual barriers (e.g. a building, a parked vehicle, a tree or bush) to reduce the intensity of the situation by blocking the dog’s view of the passing person or dog. Then keep the dog busy by rewarding some cued behaviors or simply feeding a couple of treats.
- If your dog ever reacts, turn and move your dog far enough away they can calm down. Then, reassess and see if the situation was too close or see if specific triggers can be lessened the next time. Avoid harsh punishment, like leash jerks, as they only negatively affect the dog’s emotions toward their triggers.

## Manage the situation

Set your dog up for success by carefully monitoring and managing the situations to which he is exposed.

- Remove your dog from situations when needed, or reduce the intensity of the situation to prevent the dog from rehearsing unwanted behaviors such as barking, pulling, or lunging.
- Limit exposure to overly exciting situations (such as festivals or crowded streets) that are beyond the dog's ability to handle calmly. By doing so, you will keep your dog calm enough to learn new ways of behaving.
- Distance is your friend when you see an approaching person or pup. Keep enough distance that your dog is able to remain calm, respond to cues, and eat treats.
- Walk during lower traffic times of day, in less-populated areas, or in areas with multiple route options so that you can quickly change direction.

## An escalating problem

Undesirable on-leash behaviors are likely to worsen over time unless properly addressed. Initially, the dog may show subtle signs of excitement or unease when he sees another person or dog. Then, the more amped up the dog becomes, the more heightened his reaction tends to be.

As emotionally charged encounters add up over time, the dog may start to anticipate early and escalate his response faster and stronger, even with the dog or person still a distance away.

Even if the original intention was friendly, mounting stress and frustration can intensify the dog's on-leash antics into increasingly aggressive displays.

## Catch it early by noticing these indicators

- Tensed muscles
- Erect, rigid posture
- Coming to a standstill with rapt attention on point of focus
- Straining, leaning and pulling on leash towards the interaction of interest
- Standing up on hind legs or spinning and jumping excitedly at the end of the leash
- Tail rising up in height from their normal tail carriage. Or, in dogs with tails that curl over the back, the tail may form into a tighter curl or curl higher up on the dog's back.
- A fast moving, raised and rigid tail wag
- Perked upright and forward-facing ears
- Mouth closing. May tighten back into a tight lip smile or push forward with pursued lips.
- Intense focus and concentration in direction of approaching person or pooch

- Licking lips
- Whining
- Barking. Such barks may include higher pitched yelps that signal ‘come closer’ to the incoming person or pooch.
- Overly emotional on-leash displays are reflective of a dog’s inner reality. If the dog’s outward behaviors show that he is unable to settle down, it’s likely the dog inwardly feels unsettled, too.

## Additional resources

Additional behaviors to turn your dog’s focus away from the distraction and towards you on walks include:

- **How to Walk Your Dog**  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/courses/how-to-walk-your-dog-basics/>
- **Choosing and Using Dog Walking Equipment**
  - <https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/courses/choosing-and-using-dog-collars-harnesses-and-leashes-the-fear-free-way/>
  - <https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/lessons/how-to-walk-your-dogs-basics/>
- **Basic behaviors**
  - Hand touch  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/courses/unleashing-the-power-of-touch/>
  - Sit  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/courses/teaching-your-dog-to-sit/>
  - Leave It  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/courses/teach-your-dog-to-leave-it-the-fear-free-way/>
  - Find It:  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com/lessons/game-on-make-learning-fun-for-you-and-your-dog/>
- Handout and video “DIY Enrichment: Walking and Movement”  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com>



- Searchable directory to find a Fear Free veterinary professional, trainer, or other professional who is as invested in your animal's wellbeing as you are.  
<https://fearfreehappyhomes.com>
- Seek out a veterinary behaviorist, a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist, or a certified, reward-based trainer or behavior consultant.